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ABSTRACT

Ways of expanding workplace learning in the United Kingdom by making better use of individual and organizational potential were examined. The analysis focused on the following issues: ways of fostering, improving, and increasing learning in the workplace; ways of enhancing access to and participation in workplace learning; ways of making workplace learning opportunities accessible to people who are currently outside paid employment; and ways of helping workplaces play a more central role in the United Kingdom's plans for greater participation in learning. A policy case for workplace learning was made, and an expansive approach to workplace learning was outlined. The issue of creating the institutional capacity for supporting the approach was discussed. The following are among the 12 recommendations offered to policymakers: (1) establish greater coherence between the responsibilities of the organizations currently charged with improving workplace learning; (2) restrict public funding for workplace learning to organizations that are prepared to commit to moving toward becoming expansive learning environments; (3) place equal focus on adults and young people; (4) establish learning champions within and outside the workplace; (5) provide incentives to organizations to increase training for managers to enable them to foster and maintain expansive learning environments; and (6) make the public sector set the standard and reward exemplary private sector organizations. (Contains 33 references.) (MN)

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Expanding LEARNING in the Workplace

Making more of individual and organisational potential

Lorna Unwin and Alison Fuller

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A policy discussion paper

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Making more of individual and organisational potential

A NIACE policy discussion paper

Lorna Unwin and Alison Fuller

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Introduction

> *I think most of us are looking for a calling, not a job. Most of us, like the assembly line worker, have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people.*
> (Nora Watson, quoted in Terkel, 1972, p. xxiv)

Nearly three quarters of adults between 16 and 65 are in paid work in the United Kingdom (UK). Considerable numbers of other people are actively engaged in voluntary work, and many students from the age of 14 are working part-time. The workplace, therefore, plays an important role in most people's lives. Whether we see work as fulfilling or as an unavoidable chore, it occupies a great deal of our time. The fact that everyone at work spends some of that time learning and sharing that learning with colleagues has, until recently, been largely ignored and undervalued. Workplace learning was seen to be the preserve of senior managers or a time-bounded activity involving apprentices and new recruits, or a response to external directives such as, for example, health and safety legislation. Today, however, there is a growing recognition that workplace learning involves all employees and that we need to know and understand much more about it.

For policymakers, the concept of learning at work is more tangible than the cradle-to-grave vision of learning through life and it offers the potential of delivering economic benefits as well as tackling social exclusion. For educationalists and trade unionists, workplace learning represents the opportunity to reach adults who do not participate in or have little access to formal learning opportunities. And, most importantly, the workplace can both provide a supportive and motivating site for individual adult learners to enhance their skills and knowledge, as well as act as a springboard for learning outside work. The 2001 *Survey on Adult Participation in Learning*, conducted by NIACE, confirmed that "working status has a significant impact on participation" with the greatest gains in participation among part-time and full-time workers (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2001, p. 5). Research also tells us that many young people, who have struggled to achieve at school, find the workplace a more conducive environment in which to demonstrate their potential (Unwin and Wellington, 2001).

Workplace learning can bring economic, social and personal benefits. To build upon, improve and extend workplace learning, however, places demands on everyone, from individual employee and employer through to government and its agencies.

This paper seeks answers to the following questions:

- How can learning be fostered, improved and increased in the workplace?
- How can access to and participation in workplace learning be enhanced for employees at all levels, including the self-employed and those in the voluntary sector?
- How might those people currently outside paid employment gain access to workplace learning opportunities?

- How might the workplace be helped to play a more central role in the nation's plans for greater participation in learning?

The recently published Skills Strategy White Paper (DfES, 2003, pp. 17–18) argues that "a better skilled workforce is a more productive workforce", but stresses that a skills strategy on its own will not result in greater productivity. Instead, a strategy on skills has to be part of a much broader strategy encompassing "enterprise, competition, investment and innovation". This acceptance that workforce skills cannot be separated from the product and service strategies adopted by employers, or from the broader business context in which they have to operate, is very important. It marks a significant attempt to build a much closer relationship between the supply side (education and training provision) and the demand side (employers' demand for skills). This paper challenges the Government to go a step further and place workplace learning at the heart of its plans. For it is through a better understanding and utilisation of workplace learning that organisations, in both the public and private sectors, can achieve the radical transformation implied in the Government's skills strategy.

This paper does not seek to minimise the considerable problems that some people face at work, including, for example: inequalities related to race, gender, sexual inclination and age; pressures to work excessive hours or to accept inappropriate tasks; and the dangers arising from unsafe practices. Such problems go way beyond the scope of this paper but, even withstanding their deep-rooted nature, they may be lessened or improved by greater awareness on the part of employers of the talents and capabilities of their staff.

Many of the policy and practice references provided in this paper are from England but the central argument applies equally to the rest of the UK. However, the potential for different approaches to workplace learning afforded by governmental devolution in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland may mean that progress happens more quickly there than in England.

The paper draws on recent research by Lorna Unwin and Alison Fuller conducted under the Economic and Social Research Council's Teaching and Learning Programme (award number L139 25 1005). The research explored the way in which apprenticeship was being designed and delivered in manufacturing companies in England and Wales. This was one of five projects which formed a network exploring "improving incentives to workplace learning" covering case studies in social care, cleaning services, engineering, the use of graduates in small firms through the Teaching Company Scheme, and the way in which teachers in secondary schools learn in the workplace. For more details, see www.tlrp.org.

SECTION ONE

The policy case for workplace learning

Any attempt to advocate more and better workplace learning has to be based in reality. The key objective of the vast majority of workplaces is not 'learning' but the successful delivery of goods and/or services. Learning plays a vital role in meeting that objective but its contribution is often minimised because learning is a difficult process to separate out from other day-to-day activities. For many years, there has been a fierce debate in the academic literature around the extent to which 'training' (the term usually associated with structured episodes of learning) contributed to organisational performance. More and more people are taking the view that trying to identify a direct correlation between training and organisational performance is a pointless exercise. What matters is that many employers intuitively know that workplace learning is influential but they don't attempt to take a direct measurement of its impact (Kitching and Blackburn, 2002).

From a policy perspective, the great challenge is to try and persuade employers that investment in workplace learning will contribute to improvements in their business performance. In 1988, an influential study argued that the UK was stuck in a "low-skills equilibrium" (Finegold and Soskice, 1988). Too many employers were happy with producing products and services of low quality, a situation reinforced by the shareholder mentality of a City of London only concerned with short-term profit. The policy of deregulation introduced by the Thatcher government in the 1980s has been continued by subsequent Conservative and Labour governments to the extent that politicians have been very loathe to interfere in the world of business and have forced the public sector to adopt more private sector practices. Although this has brought record levels of employment (in contrast to other countries in the European Union), the nature of some of that employment (low pay, low status, poor prospects, and long hours) is a cause for concern.

In 2003, the UK is recording high levels of paid employment, yet a third of the workforce has qualifications below level 2. At the same time, nearly 7 million jobs require no qualification at all (Felstead *et al.*, 2002). By relying solely on improvements to schooling, it is expected that, by 2010, 70 per cent of the workforce will hold at least a level 2 qualification but this has to be set against the fact that Germany and France are already well ahead of that figure. The workplace has to make a bigger and better contribution to the UK's learning gap. Furthermore, the workplace can and should be a natural site for learning, capable of motivating people of all ages to develop their skills and acquire new knowledge both in and outside work settings. The challenge is, therefore: How does the UK maintain its high employment levels whilst, at the same time, improving its productivity and hence raise its standard of living?

In December 2001, a report from the Cabinet Office's Performance and Innovation Unit had a major impact because, unlike previous government reports over the years, it announced that the demand for what it called 'workforce development' must come from employers as well as individuals. (PIU, 2001). Whilst seemingly common sense to most people, the Performance and Innovation Unit's willingness to state publicly that employers should raise their game was a considerable policy breakthrough. Building on earlier work by the National Skills Task Force, the Performance and Innovation Unit pronounced employment and enhanced workforce development to be the keys to a more prosperous and socially inclusive society. The report also broke new ground by moving away from the simplistic rhetoric of some government documents and, instead, described the complex cultural and structural problems which lie behind the reluctance of both employers and individuals to engage and invest in learning.

The Performance and Innovation Unit report heralded a major push from government to galvanise the appropriate agencies and employer bodies into promoting and enhancing workplace learning, and it gave extra support to those advocating a central role for the trade unions. A number of important developments central to the enhancement of workplace learning are currently underway. They are led by the key arms of government (Cabinet Office, Treasury, Department for Education and Skills, Department for Trade and Industry, Department for Work and Pensions, the Learning and Skills Council, and the Regional Development Agencies), all of whom have a key stake in ensuring that economic and social progress go hand in hand. The initiatives include:

- Collaboration between local Learning and Skills Councils and Regional Development Agencies to bring employers and education and training providers closer together.
- The expansion of Employer Training Pilots, which provide funding to subsidise the cost of sending employees on training courses.
- An increase from £11m to £14m a year for the Union Learning Fund which, since its launch in 1998, has supported over 400 initiatives for employees in a range of learning opportunities.
- Statutory right (under the Employment Act, 2002) for 4,500 Union Learning Representatives to take paid time off from work to open up learning opportunities for employees.
- The identification of 20 leading employers to act as 'Employer Champions' to promote adult skills training in literacy, language and numeracy in the workplace.
- Development of a 'no wrong door' policy to make sure businesses can get the advice they need for improving their performance.
- The expansion and improvement of Modern Apprenticeship.

- The development of a coherent work-based pathway which will begin with 14-year-olds in school and stretch through apprenticeship to Foundation Degrees and on to professional status.
- The establishment of Centres of Vocational Excellence for the provision of education and training in colleges and other providers.

The new Skills Strategy White Paper states that the Government intends to further enhance these initiatives in order to achieve what it refers to as a 'demand-led' system. By this, the Government means a system which will give "employers more support in accessing the training they need, and more influence in deciding how that training is provided" (DfES, 2003, p. 21).

Whilst the Government and its agencies are obviously sincere in their aims, the concentration of effort on bringing about a 'demand-led' system will not, on its own, raise skill levels or improve and expand workplace learning. In this paper, we want to argue that an understanding of and support for teaching and learning have to lie at the heart of the new skills strategy. Furthermore, we will argue that whilst some employers may have a less than enthusiastic interest in expanding learning opportunities, many more would embrace a learning culture if they had a better understanding of how to achieve it. Alongside creating more schemes and initiatives, substantial time and resources should be spent on considering how the processes which underpin workforce development might best be fostered. In particular, the agencies which have been established to implement and support workforce development need to strengthen their expertise in:

- the relationship between work design and skills and knowledge;
- the relationship between employee involvement and organisational performance;
- the nature and role of teaching and learning in the workplace;
- the role of managers in fostering a learning culture;
- the use of learning technologies.

Expertise in workplace and work-related teaching and learning is central to a skills and workforce development strategy. It also ensures that the needs of different types of learners are addressed. For example, it is crucial that organisations consider the long-term needs of their younger employees who should be given the opportunity to gain qualifications that can help them progress within and beyond their current workplace. Sensitivity will need to be shown when creating opportunities for employees who lack literacy, language and numeracy skills, and for those with learning disabilities. In both instances, these employees may have high levels of work-related skills and knowledge which are unrecognised in terms of their level of formal education and qualifications (see Unwin, 2002).

SECTION TWO

Learning at work

Introduction

The term 'workplace' is used in this paper to refer to any organisation or part of an organisation that comprises people working together, whether in the public or private sector, and including the voluntary sector. The term 'workplace learning' is used to embrace all types of learning, which are generated or stimulated by the needs of the workplace, including formal on-the-job training, informal learning, and work-related off-the-job education and training. The Performance and Innovation Unit report, referred to earlier, recommended the use of the term 'workforce development' to describe "activities which increase the capacity of individuals to participate effectively in the workforce, thereby improving their productivity and employability" (PIU, 2001, p. 6). Such a definition, the report argued, made a clearer distinction between workforce development and such terms as training or lifelong learning, whilst also firmly grounding workforce development in the needs of business. The problem with this definition is that it still focuses on individual employees rather than on the workplace as a whole. A key theme in this paper will be the need for workplace learning to be understood as an embedded process, which depends on but can also shape and change the culture and behaviour of an organisation. Furthermore, it will be argued that where people have been encouraged and supported in their work-related learning, they are more likely to have the confidence to engage in learning outside the workplace.

Perhaps the most well-known example of workplace learning is the apprenticeship model of formation training, which was founded on the principle that young people would learn best alongside more experienced colleagues in the workplace. Apprenticeship is a universal term, recognised across both the industrialised world and in pre-industrial societies. In workplaces which encourage and celebrate learning, new recruits, apprentices and experienced workers establish 'communities of practice' in which skills and knowledge are passed from one generation to the next (Lave and Wenger, 1991). We know, however, that many people work in organisations that do not encourage learning, either at individual or organisational level. There are also organisations which might aspire to take learning more seriously but which are hampered through structural problems such as being understaffed or being stuck at the low quality end of the product and service market (Keep and Mayhew, 1998).

Whilst acknowledging the negligent attitude of many employers when it comes to improving the skills and knowledge of their employees, it has to be remembered that running an organisation, whether in the public or private sector, is a complicated business. The nature, size and scope of workplaces vary enormously but most are

subject to the common pressures of competition, external regulation, reliance on the state to provide decent transportation and other infrastructure, finding and attracting the right people, and the fragility of the local and/or sectoral economy in which they are located. There is little time, therefore, to debate the role and place of workplace learning. Size matters enormously here. Those organisations classified as 'small' under the definition of the 1985 Companies Act (that is with less than 50 employees) make up 99 per cent of UK private sector businesses and account for 43.4 per cent of employment. These organisations are less likely to offer their employees structured training opportunities, be involved with government-funded initiatives such as Modern Apprenticeship, and have Trade Union Learning Representatives and NVQ assessors on site (see Hughes *et al.*, 2002).

It also has to be remembered that employees, as well as employers, can be ambivalent when it comes to workplace learning. When employees are offered training and development opportunities, they will be construed positively or negatively depending on the nature of the workplace itself (see Evans and Rainbird, 2002). For example, such opportunities may be seen as a reward for and recognition of effort, as a signal of value or to give status. On the other hand, training may be seen as a threat, "an indicator of poor performance or a signal that work is about to be intensified". Some people create a clear separation between their lives in and outside work and regard learning as something which is confined to the latter. Others may learn a great deal in the workplace but are reluctant to pass this learning on to less experienced colleagues. This is often related to their fear of losing their job (particularly to younger people) or other barriers that their employer has created. Such ambivalence can, however, be lessened if workplace learning is seen to have meaning and benefit for the individual.

Despite the mantra of the 1980s that the developed countries were witnessing a shift away from production line manufacturing to much more flexible ways of working, many people are still employed in organisations where work is largely routine and offers little scope for creativity or personal autonomy. At the same time, flexibility is entering many workplaces in the form of team working, more people are being allowed to spend time working from home, and new technologies are being creatively managed to enhance rather than constrain the design of some jobs. These characteristics, plus related ones such as multi-skilling, supplying business information to employees, and profit-related bonuses, are now being referred to as 'high performance working practices' (see Ashton and Sung, 2002). These practices acknowledge the complexity of many seemingly routine jobs and the need for employees to solve problems and communicate with each other. They also acknowledge the fact that workplaces need to change, adapt and innovate, and, hence, need employees who can both cope with and contribute to such change.

Such new forms of work organisation and production call for supportive people management strategies and, therefore, make new demands of managers at all levels of the organisation. The education and development of managers has long been identified as a weak link in the chain of factors influencing workforce development and organisational effectiveness in the UK. This is despite the fact that managers are more

likely to receive training funded by their organisations than other employee groups. One of the problems identified by research is that provision, even for managers, is unevenly distributed and often too narrowly focused. (see Antonacopoulou, 2002) However, whatever the type and level of the job, everyone learns at work to perform competently, to 'beat the system', about personal relationships, about power, about their own potential, and about their aspirations. As Charles Darrah (1996, p. 170) learned from his detailed ethnographic study of employees in the United States of America (USA), "Workers may have learned well the lessons taught by the workplace that are necessary for continued employment there. These may be quite different from the lessons formally valued by management".

Understanding learning at work

Trying to explain teaching and learning processes in the workplace is a tricky business. As a 16-year-old bakery assistant in Manchester in the 1930s, the mother of one of the authors (Lorna Unwin) learned how to apply the most elaborate and fine filigree icing to wedding cakes by watching her boss. This was not the well-known approach of 'sitting by Nelly' as my mother was not an apprentice. Her 'secret watching', as she called it, had to be done whilst she went about her own more lowly duties such as preparing chocolate icing for the éclairs, washing up and rolling macaroons in coconut. She memorised her boss's skills and practised them at home on friends and family. This expertise enabled her to supplement a meagre wage by earning valuable extra money in her spare time. Was this learning 'formal', 'informal', 'tacit', or 'non-formal'? It was certainly 'planned' and 'intentional', two characteristics not often associated with the 'informal'. Yet it was also 'tacit' in that she found it very difficult to explain to her daughter how to estimate the consistency of the icing to ensure the right balance of delicacy and strength. It combined artistry with manual skill (beating large quantities of sugar and egg white without electric tools is a tiring process) and vocational knowledge (e.g. add glycerine to stop the icing becoming like concrete). It was situated and experiential, and progressed through much trial and error. Her experience is typical of so many people who are restricted to carrying out certain functions in the workplace and whose potential is never exposed or recognised.

Researchers argue over what counts as learning and over terms such as 'formal', 'informal', 'non-formal' and 'incidental' learning (see, for example, Boud and Garrick, 1999; Billett, 1999; Eraut *et al.*, 1998). Some argue that distinctions between these terms are meaningless and unnecessary as all learning in the workplace has a purpose. Trying to expose the nature and content of everyday workplace learning is, however, difficult for researchers. The Japanese have been doing their best for many years and have found ways to utilise the tacit (hidden) knowledge and skills of production workers in manufacturing industry to great effect (see Koike, 1997). All researchers can agree on one point: the belief that learning at work needs to be better supported and managed.

A key person for workplace learning is the manager. In a large company, the line managers who stand between the company directors and the main body of employees

have a crucial role to play. In a small- or medium-sized company, the senior manager or even company owner will be closely involved. This is because the manager, at whatever level, is key to the creation of what Eraut *et al.* (1998, p. 20) call a "climate favourable to learning". The manager often organises job roles and allocates tasks and has a big say in the extent to which employees can cross over from one role to another. Of course, the manager is also affected by (and may have helped create) the broader structures of the organisation. In order to understand the nature of workplace learning in different organisations, we have to examine these structures.

Work organisation and capability

> *A new division of learning requires another vocabulary – one of colleagues and co-learners, of exploration, experimentation, and innovation.* (Zuboff, 1988, p. 395)

In his landmark book of 1972, *Working*, the American journalist Studs Terkel brings together the voices of men and women working in a wide range of fields, including, among others, police officers, farmers, miners, truck drivers, housewives, switchboard operators, dentists, academics, plant managers, hairdressers, actors, cleaners, teachers and sports professionals (Terkel, 1972). He found that for some people there was "meaning to their work well over and beyond the reward of the paycheck" whilst for others there was "a hardly concealed discontent" (ibid, p. xi). Some workers had found ways to rise above the impoverished nature of their jobs by taking pride in what they did. In their interviews, the workers share a common desire to be treated with respect by their managers and colleagues and to have the chance to demonstrate their potential. The extent to which those concerns are recognised and addressed depends upon the way in which their jobs are designed and organised and the culture of the organisational environment.

Those organisations which have seen that there could be a profitable connection between work organisation, performance, sustainability and employee satisfaction have been given the label 'High Performance Work Organisations'. In their analysis of these organisations, Ashton and Sung, drawing on a growing body of research from around the world, explain that:

> *…the organization of production is based on the assumption that competition is based not just on the cost but also the incremental improvements in the quality of the goods or services produced…Here the division of labour is organized to ensure that all employees are in a position to contribute toward the overall performance of the organization and its improvement through time. Management is no longer the sole repository of knowledge; it is now its task to shape the production process in such a way as to maximise the contributions that the workers make to the improvement of the organizations' performance.* (Ashton and Sung, 2002, p. 73)

These organisations have made significant breaks with traditional organisational behaviour:

- They acknowledge the knowledge and skills of employees at all levels.
- They use this capacity to develop new ways of working.
- They invest in the continuous learning of the whole workforce.
- They place a high value on the quality of their goods and services.

This may appear to be, paradoxically, both utopian and common-sense at the same time: utopian because it is not the natural law of business to take a long-term view when short-term gain is the easier and more desirable option; and common-sense, in that creating a happier and more equitable working environment should improve performance and the chance for survival. Advocates of the 'high performance' route acknowledge that achieving the conditions required takes considerable time and effort, that both management and employees have to embrace change and, perhaps most importantly, you need to achieve a critical mass of 'high performance' practices in order to affect meaningful change. Some organisations have tried to introduce 'high performance' practices without properly consulting or putting their trust in the whole workforce and so created high degrees of scepticism and dissatisfaction among their employees. At worst, 'high performance' practices, if poorly implemented, can lead to employee stress and work intensification (see Lowe, 2000). As with all new ideas, however, the 'high performance' concept has to be properly understood as an approach which sees organisations as holistic and organic entities: imposing teamwork or multi-skilling in a piecemeal and ad hoc manner without gaining the trust and consent of employees is likely to lead to trouble. On the other hand, if extrinsic factors such as pay, opportunities for progression, and the physical conditions of the workplace are poor, as in the public services in the UK, then employee motivation will remain low despite the fact that they *are* being consulted and given autonomy.

For the purposes of this paper, the 'high performance' approach is particularly useful because: a) it draws attention to the need for organisations to consider their values; b) it offers case study evidence that increasing the levels of knowledge and skills across the workforce can improve an organisation's performance and sustainability; and c) it embraces the whole workforce. For workplace learning to be treated seriously, organisations need to believe that it will contribute to both profits (or, in the case of the public and voluntary sectors, however performance is measured) and survival. Proving a direct causal link between investment in workforce development and improved organisational performance is, however, a contested and highly complex art. Experts argue that it is very difficult to separate out the effects on performance of a range of diverse variables such as organisational ownership/regulation, new technology, position in the labour market, product strategy, stock market/shareholder demands, and currency exchange rates, from the impact on performance of increased skill levels (Keep, Mayhew and Corney, 2002). In the public sector, the imposition of

government targets, for example, can have a highly distorting effect on the performance of schools, colleges and hospitals. All organisations are subject to external forces as well as internal ones and even the most enthusiastic learning organisations can suddenly find themselves in trouble due to a sudden change in the local, national or international climate.

Experts also argue about the types of practices that constitute a 'high performance' organisation and so a number of different checklists have emerged. Ashton and Sung argue, however, that these definitional differences are not as great as they first appear and that, in reality, 'high performance' is better understood as having four dimensions within which 'high performance' practices are 'bundled' together:

- Employee autonomy and involvement in decision-making (e.g. self-managed work teams, quality circles, and multi-skilling).
- Support for employee performance (e.g. appraisal and peer review systems, mentoring, opportunities for continuous learning, trained trainers).
- Rewards for employee performance (e.g. better pay rates, individual and group-based performance pay, profit sharing).
- Sharing of information and knowledge (e.g. systems for communicating with employees and to ensure employee feedback is used to develop organisational strategy).

Although it was pointed out earlier that the link between organisational performance and improved levels of workforce development is difficult to prove, a growing body of research does show that where 'high performance' characteristics are present en masse and have become embedded, then a positive correlation between organisational performance and these characteristics can be identified. Importantly, training and other forms of workplace and work-related learning are seen as part of a much bigger package of practices which, if present together, can impact on issues such as recruitment, retention, and employee satisfaction. Investing in training alone is not enough.

Some people may be put off by the term 'high performance' and associate it, narrowly, with profitability. They may regard it as only applicable to those very specialised organisations working at the top end of, say, the biotechnology or electronics sectors. We would argue, however, that a key strength of the 'high performance' approach is that it is made up of a set of people management and development practices that can be adapted to suit the needs of both the public and private sectors, and all sizes of organisation. As importantly, the approach appears to embrace the notion that organisations should be built around a set of values, including trust, recognition of employee worth, belief in people's potential, and commitment to the stability and well-being of the organisational community. This is not to align the concept with motherhood and apple pie, for, at the end of the day, the pressures of organisational survival may ruthlessly override these values. The now infamous gaffe by Gerald Ratner, then owner of a nationwide chain of jewellery stores, saying that he

had made a fortune by selling low-priced 'crap', has been used to excellent effect by researchers to remind us that some employers would place little value in the ideals of the 'high performance' approach (see Keep and Mayhew, 1998). In addition, individual employees will react differently to workplace opportunities depending on the role work plays in their lives, their work histories and their general disposition to learning (see Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003). The time has come, however, for policymakers, employers, and everyone concerned with expanding workplace learning to concentrate much more effort on improving the conditions within which that learning is trying to take place. What we will try to show later on in this paper is that the characteristics of the 'high performance' approach are necessary for the creation of an 'expansive' environment for workplace learning.

The national policy framework within which organisations sit is vitally important to the development and sustainability of high performance working practices and the improvement of workplace learning more generally. Across the world there are different forms of state regulation, public policy, training systems and worker organisation. In the UK, as in the US, notions of individualism and voluntarism have been preferred, whereas the Asian Tiger governments such as Singapore, South Korea, and Japan, seek to directly influence employers' practices and manipulate labour markets (see Ashton and Sung, 2002). There are, however, ways in which the UK Government could consider making greater demands on employers to invest in and expand workplace learning:

- Require more occupations to be 'licensed' – this would mean employers would have to ensure their employees were qualified to a national standard.
- Develop the requirements for Investors in People to include more emphasis on the provision and spread of workplace learning opportunities.
- Use public sector procurement as a mechanism for requiring higher standards of workplace learning through the supply chains.
- Provide tax incentives for employers to increase the numbers of employees to upgrade their qualification levels. Tax incentives could also be used to promote training in literacy, language and numeracy skills.
- Provide funds to subsidise leave of absence for managerial staff to visit organisations which implement high performance approaches.

These suggestions would play a part in pushing UK employers towards a more high performance approach to their business.

A key way in which the Government could intervene much more publicly and directly is through its overall responsibility for the public sector. Since Tony Blair's government came to power, there has been a consistent demand that the public sector should 'modernise'. This is, of course, a highly contested policy but many public sector organisations could learn a great deal from the high performance approach.

The public sector could also play a major role in raising awareness about the importance of providing learning opportunities for people in work. An excellent example of this is the National Health Service initiative to create a *Skills Escalator* which

provides opportunities for employees to undertake further training and development on a 'step'-by-'step' basis, hence the metaphor of the escalator. The NHS is working in partnership with the trade union, UNISON, the Workers' Educational Association, the Open University, and the National Health Service University. Crucial features of the escalator are that all courses are free and staff are released from work to attend without losing pay.

Given the emphasis this paper has placed on the importance of context, it is only right to acknowledge the considerable difficulties which policymakers in any country face when trying to influence workplace learning. Clearly the Government has to consider the well-being of the country as a whole, whilst employers are focused on the well-being of their organisations. These goals should not be incompatible but the parties concerned may disagree about the means to achieving them. Furthermore, it is much easier for governments to influence the supply side, in terms of increasing the availability of and funding for training courses and qualifications, than the demand side. Yet, as we have seen earlier in this paper, concentrating on the supply side or on encouraging employers to do more training will not, in itself, transform the culture of organisations to the extent that is required.

SECTION THREE

An expansive approach to workplace learning

Introduction

In this section of the paper, we introduce a model of workplace learning which has emerged from our recent research into workplace learning (see Fuller and Unwin, 2003). In order to discover how, why and for whom workplace learning occurs, it is necessary to understand the interaction between the organisational context, the workplace learning environment and the individuals engaged in learning. Hence, if you want to understand why the nature and content of apprenticeships vary so much from one organisation to another or why some organisations only offer learning opportunities to their managerial staff, you have to examine the following: the history and culture of the organisation; how work is organised and controlled; the skills profile of the company and how the skills are distributed; the extent to which the range of tasks and skills have been mapped; and the availability of a structured learning programme designed to generate opportunities to gain breadth and depth. The workplace itself can be viewed as a place which provides a more or less fertile environment for learning. In addition, individuals have their own learning territories, made up of different sites of learning (e.g. the home, a sports club, a book reading group, etc.) including the workplace which reflect the opportunities they have to learn in and outside work and which help us to understand their identities as learners and participants.

Expansive and restrictive learning environments

A possible framework for analysing that relationship conceptualises organisations as standing on an expansive–restrictive continuum. At one end are what we call 'expansive' characteristics, for example: the way skills are distributed widely throughout an organisation as opposed to restricting them to certain employees; the way skills and knowledge of all employees, not just the so-called 'knowledge' workers are valued; and the way managers enable rather than control the workforce. At the other end of the continuum lie 'restrictive' characteristics which display a much narrower approach to work design, to learning opportunities, and to organisational behaviour more generally. Organisations which display mainly expansive characteristics can be said to lie towards the expansive end of the continuum and, hence, provide expansive learning environments.

The term 'expansive learning' might be better understood as learning which is creative and dynamic and constantly evolving. Such learning is not confined by artificial workplace boundaries that restrict employees from crossing from one area of expertise to another, or from contributing to discussions about how problems might be solved or work better organised (Engestrom, 1994, 2001).

The importance of the model proposed here, however, is that it places learning firmly within a wider expansive–restrictive organisational context. In other words, workplace learning cannot be expansive or restrictive on its own: its emergence along that continuum results from the organisational structures and cultures of which it is a part.

Table 1 displays the organisational characteristics of the expansive–restrictive continuum:

Table 1. Work organisation and mission.

Expansive ⟷	**Restrictive**
• Widely distributed skills	• Polarised distribution of skills
• Technical skills valued	• Technical skills taken for granted
• Knowledge and skills of whole workforce developed and valued	• Knowledge and skills of key workers/groups developed and valued
• Cross-disciplinary groups/ communication encouraged	• Bounded communication and work
• Manager/supervisor as enabler	• Manager as controller
• Chances to learn new jobs/skills	• Lack of workplace mobility
• Expanded job design	• Restricted job design
• Bottom–up approach to innovation	• Top–down approach to innovation
• Formative approach to evaluation	• Summative approach to evaluation
• Individual progression encouraged – strong internal labour market	• Weak internal labour market – recruitment usually from outside to meet skill needs
• Government-funded initiative (e.g. union learning reps, Modern Apprenticeship) absorbed as part of a long-term workforce development strategy	• Government-funded initiative bolted on with little understanding of purpose

The model proposes that the expansive/restrictive characteristics of the way in which work is organised are then translated into the infrastructure for workforce development and, hence, an organisation's learning culture, as Table 2 shows:

Table 2. Organisational learning cultures.

Expansive	Restrictive
• Strong workplace learning infrastructure and dedicated staff	• Workplace learning conceived narrowly as 'events'
• History of training/handing down training values	• Ahistorical, lack of organisational memory
• Company maintains its commitment to learning	• Shift in business culture can cause sudden shift in approach to workplace learning
• Strong/distinct voice to champion workplace learning	• Learning voice secondary to business voice
• Learning activities are proactive rather than reactive	• Learning activities may appear ad hoc
• Employees given time to develop and reflect on their learning away from the workplace	• All learning opportunities confined to immediate workplace/work station
• Traditional, knowledge-based VQs valued, whole qualifications valued	• Competence-based VQs and unit-based approach preferred for ease and speed
• Strong concept of apprenticeship/ formation training model	• Weak concept and little or no tradition of apprenticeship/ formation training
• Broad approach to developing whole workforce and organisation	• Emphasis on management training and behavioural change
• Long term investment in people	• Purpose of activities often unclear
• Good training reputation in local community	• Reputation for products not training
• Purpose of workplace learning is to enhance capability and improve performance – seen as mutually reinforcing	• Purpose of workplace learning is to meet short-term commercial imperatives only
• Approach to workplace learning evolves/incremental change	• Approach to workplace learning reflects shifts in business strategy

As we can see from Table 2, the cultural differences determine the character of the learning opportunities on offer in an organisation, hence some organisations provide an expansive learning environment, whereas others provide more restrictive learning environments. This model allows organisations to analyse their characteristics to see where they lie on the expansive–restrictive continuum and consider the changes they need to make to move further towards the expansive end. The model can be applied regardless of the size or nature of the organisation and by those in both the public and

private sectors and the voluntary sector. The 'high performance' working practices discussed earlier in the paper can be overlaid on the expansive column as they align well with the cultural basis of the model.

An expansive approach to apprenticeship

This company manufactures bathroom showers and employs some 700 people. It has a well-established apprenticeship programme which has been used to develop successive generations of skilled and qualified engineers and technicians. Many of the company's ex-apprentices have progressed to senior management positions. Currently, the company employs five apprentices in engineering, one in steel production and processing, and one in accountancy. The apprentices participate in learning over time and in many internal 'communities of practice' by rotating through the different departments. They attend the local college on a day-release basis where they pursue knowledge-based vocational qualifications that can also qualify them for entrance to higher education. The apprentices take part in residential courses to develop team-working skills and, through the company's apprentice association, they get involved in charity activities in the local community. This means they cross boundaries in terms of the places in they develop their skills and are not restricted to one part of the actual workplace.

A restricted approach to apprenticeship

Company B is a small, family-run company of around 40 employees providing steel polishing services to other businesses. The vast majority of employees work on the shop floor as semi-skilled machine operators. The company offered its first apprenticeships two years ago, as a response to difficulties it was having in recruiting adults with relevant experience, and currently employs two apprentices in (steel) production processes. The apprentices are primarily members of one community of practice, which centres on the operation of steel polishing machines in a shop floor environment. They have learned from more experienced employees and have become full participants in under one year. Access to participation in communities of practice beyond the workplace is limited to attendance at a series (about ten) of off-the-job, half-day sessions on 'steel industry awareness' which take place in the training provider's premises. The apprentices pursue standards-based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) at work with the help of their supervisor and a training provider who makes occasional visits to monitor their progress. They do not have access to knowledge-based vocational qualifications and are now stuck in a job which offers no progression.

It is important to stress that the model should be seen as a continuum and not as a rigid polarisation of 'good' (expansive) and 'bad' (restrictive) practice. There will be occasions when, for various reasons, organisations have to move more towards the restrictive end of the continuum.

Implications of the model for workplace learning opportunities

A key characteristic of an expansive learning environment is the belief that people at all levels across the organisation possess valuable skills and knowledge and have the capacity to learn (see Fuller and Unwin, 2004). In addition, the organisation itself is a dynamic body, capable of re-inventing itself. This implies that any agency attempting to improve workplace learning opportunities must understand how a particular organisation has evolved and the nature of its cultural make-up in order to assess its ability to respond. Organisations positioned towards the restrictive end of the continuum will require considerable support to enable them to assimilate and then implement new ideas.

This expansive–restrictive model could be used, therefore, to analyse individual organisations. It could also be used to assess the characteristics of occupational sectors in order to establish the likely barriers to the acceptance of new initiatives. This could be particularly useful for staff in Regional Development Agencies, Sector Skills Councils, local Learning and Skills Councils, and the Small Business Service. Within sectors which, historically, have demonstrated more restrictive characteristics, it may be possible to identify certain organisations which have broken free of these traditions and so determine strategies which might move the whole sector towards a more expansive future.

Individual employees (perhaps with the help of advice and guidance workers and/or mentors) could also use the model to assess the organisations within which they work in order to establish the likelihood of them gaining access to learning opportunities.

The model may also assist those agencies who are charged with providing adults with guidance about such opportunities and who need to know more about the barriers preventing adults from progressing at work. There are many schemes in place to put adults in touch with and provide funding for both work-related and non-work-related opportunities, but more ways should be found to encourage people in workplaces to view these opportunities as a positive chance for the organisation as a whole to benefit. From April 2003, employees have had the legal right to approach Union Learning Representatives for advice on how to access learning opportunities in cases where the employer has forbidden them to do so. Again, the model might help these representatives to influence those reluctant organisations to shift towards a more expansive view of workplace learning and workforce development.

Using expansive job design to foster collaborative learning

This company is a steel 'stockholder' with some 80 employees. It is part of a large Swedish corporation but operates as a stand-alone business buying and selling steel. In order to compete, the company must successfully market and sell its steel products by assuring their quality, value for money and the efficiency of the company's services. To meet these business goals, the company is investing in management development and customer service training.

To address the concern that sales staff had developed specialist knowledge of a limited number of products, the company decided to rearrange the way their work was organised, jobs were designed and the way desks were arranged. Under the new system, sales staff were required to sell all the company's product lines, hence they needed to learn about different products and get to know new customers. To support the change and to encourage the sharing of knowledge and information, desks were reconfigured in a circular seating arrangement to facilitate knowledge exchange and problem solving. Some of the sales staff had initially felt that their specialist (expert) status would be undermined by the change. In practice, they found that they had added to their knowledge and had gained from seeing how other people worked and the greater opportunities available for collaborative problem solving.

Using team working to encourage new learning

This company employs some 300 people and manufactures large steel rods and bars mainly for use in the construction industry. Management and unions have negotiated a substantial package of changes in employees' pay, terms and conditions. This involves a reorganisation of shifts and shift patterns and the guarantee of pay rises for those workers signed off as competent in 60 per cent or more of their shift's tasks. A simplified and less highly stratified division of labour was introduced to encourage flexible working and reduce what were seen as restrictive practices. An important component of the new system related to the creation of a new post of team leader to replace the traditional job of foreman. Several of the team leaders had previously been foremen and were able to contrast the roles. There were two major extensions to the original job and both of these were direct consequences of the reorganisation of work, pay and conditions. First, team leaders were responsible for helping all members of their teams to achieve the 60 per cent 'competency threshold'. In some cases, this meant that much of their time was spent training others and recording their achievements. Second, tasks relating to the organisation of work and the attainment of targets (e.g. on production and health and safety) were

delegated from shift managers to team leaders. This meant that team leaders were now responsible for motivating their teams as well as monitoring progress. The extended job design, together with support from off-the-job workshops, created opportunities for new learning and a multidimensional approach to the acquisition of expertise.

An expansive approach to learning outside work

This company has a tradition of supporting employees who want to take up educational opportunities outside work in their own time on the basis that it creates good will, helps the individual and may promote employee loyalty. Individuals are invited to make requests to the personnel manager for financial help in paying course fees. Examples include four men, aged between 39 and 44 years old, who are studying as follows: to teach literacy, language and numeracy skills; for a humanities degree; for an Higher National Certificate in Business and Information Systems; and for a Computing and IT degree. Although they recognise that there is no direct relationship between their work for the company and the topics they are studying, the men believe that the courses are helping them to maintain a positive attitude at work despite there being negligible possibilities for any career progression. They had all chosen knowledge-based courses to be stretched intellectually. They also wanted to pursue well-respected qualifications which might be useful should they need to seek alternative employment.

Implications for teaching and learning within and beyond the workplace

The expansive–restrictive model encourages managers and employees to examine their perceptions of teaching and learning and, in particular, to regard teaching and learning as everyday activities in the workplace. Teaching and learning are not confined to off-the-job training sessions or specific training episodes in the workplace (e.g. when a new machine or procedure is explained). When an employee explains a process or procedure to a colleague, they are engaged in a pedagogic relationship and will use a range of skills common to teachers and trainers. In most organisations, when employees want to know something, they will, almost instinctively, gravitate to certain people whom they know to have the capacity (and perhaps patience) of a good teacher. Yet these people are barely acknowledged in many organisations.

A classic problem for work-related learning is how to achieve integration between on- and off-the-job activity by making the latter seem relevant to the former. In many cases, the problem is compounded when employees attempt to transfer the new ideas and skills they have acquired off-the-job into their workplace and are met by hostility, or worse, apathy.

In Table 3, the expansive–restrictive model has been applied to teaching and learning within and beyond the workplace in an attempt to show, again, the dynamic relationship between processes such as teaching and learning and the wider organisational context in which they sit and by which they are shaped.

Table 3. Teaching and learning approaches

Expansive	**Restrictive**
• Teaching and learning skills developed across the workforce	• Teaching and learning skills seen as province of designated staff
• Variety of teaching and learning methods employed	• Restricted use, largely teacher/ trainer-centred
• Programmes constructed to recognise experience and expertise of participants	• Little acknowledgement of participants' experience or expectations
• Employees encouraged to reflect on their work and learning	• Refelection time seen as unproductive
• Individuals encouraged to demonstrate expertise, e.g. by supervising apprentices and other new workers	• Little recognition of expertise other than at top level
• Employees consulted on best ways to learn	• Assumptions made about employees' preferred learning styles
• Explicit attention to development of vocational knowledge	• Knowledge regarded as implicit in performance and not given separate attention
• Off-the-job learning integrated with on-the-job activity	• Little connection made between on and off-the-job learning
• Strategies for ensuring off-the-job learning can be incorporated into workplace activity	• Little attempt to remove barriers to transfer of ideas from off-the-job learning
• Learning spaces available in the workplace serviced with appropriate support	• Impersonal open learning centres dominated by machines
• Non-work-related learning valued and encouraged	• Non-work-related learning ignored
• Skills in, and responsibilities for, mentoring and coaching widely dispersed through organisation	• Ad hoc approach to informal learning

Despite the fact that most people at work realise that formal qualifications do not provide an accurate measure of their capabilities and expertise, society at large still places a considerable value on qualifications. Around the world, governments use qualifications as an instrument of policy, particularly to "make schools, colleges and other training providers more accountable" (see Young, 2003, p. 200). Employers, of course, use qualifications as a sifting device to select people for interview, but once a person has secured a job, it's their performance in the workplace that matters. Policymakers use qualifications as a proxy for measuring the levels of skills in the workforce, so we have national statistics for the numbers of people 'qualified' at, for example, level 2. The problem with this is that there is no real connection between this measure and the actual level at which people are using skills in the workplace (see Fuller and Unwin, 1999). This has led to the argument that qualifications are either irrelevant for adults in work, or that qualifications should be turned into 'bite-sized' chunks which can be separately accredited and funded (see Boston, 2003). From the perspective of individual employees, however, whole qualifications still have a vital role to play in terms of progression within an occupational sector, transition from one job to another, personal development and recognition, and as a passport to further and higher education (see Fuller, 2000).

In terms of the expansive–restrictive model, we would argue that an expansive learning environment would provide employees with access to whole qualifications, including those recognised beyond the immediate workplace context. Unitisation of qualifications (i.e. turning them into 'bite-sized' chunks) has a role to play in terms of helping to motivate adults for whom qualifications and/or study seem daunting, and it might motivate employers to provide at least some structure for workforce development. The danger is, however, that individuals would not be supported to put the chunks together to form a whole qualification. Furthermore, policymakers might be attracted to unitisation because it could present a cheaper and quicker route (however dubious) for measuring workforce development activity in the economy. Taking an expansive approach to workforce development and to education and training policymaking would ensure that the needs of individual employees were given equal value to those of the organisation. As the examples provided earlier in this paper show, when individual needs and organisational needs are brought into alignment, they form a powerful force for organisational change and improvement.

SECTION FOUR

Creating the institutional capacity for supporting the approach

Introduction

In its report, *Workforce Development Strategy to 2005*, the Learning and Skills Council states its vision as being that:

> *...by 2010, young people and adults will have knowledge and productive skills matching the best in the world.* (LSC, 2001, p. 1)

To achieve that vision, the Learning and Skills Council has set out the following strategic objectives for workforce development:

1. To raise informal demand for employment-related skills among individuals and employers.
2. To support improvements to the responsiveness and flexibility of the supply side.
3. To contribute to the development of an underpinning framework of better skills and labour market intelligence, responsive vocational qualifications and improved links to the wider educational agenda.

The vision and its objectives are focused on: a) the need to improve the skills of individuals; b) the need for providers to be more responsive; and c) the need to provide employers with more information about their local labour markets. These are all necessary but they need to relate to the broader goal of organisational reform and transformation as discussed throughout this paper. The Learning and Skills Council's report does contain a commitment to build the capacity of publicly-funded workforce development advisers to work with employers, but this needs to be given much higher priority. Major attention needs to be given to the institutional structures to support workplace learning and to the capability of staff employed by the various organisations charged with its development.

Structural confusion

Most employers and members of the general public would be astonished to learn of the thousands of well-meaning professionals who are working hard to improve workplace learning in the UK. Since the devolving of government to Scotland, Wales and

Northern Ireland in the late 1990s, new agencies have been established in those countries to take responsibility for the skills and workforce development agenda. Meanwhile, in England, the printers and sign writers have been kept permanently busy as agencies have come and gone and changed their names. It is often a shock to new researchers when they interview employers that they refer to 'O' Levels rather than GCSEs, or to the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) instead of the Modern Apprenticeship. Yet, it should not be surprising that, given the turbulent nature of education and training policy, employers and the public more generally fail to keep up with the changes.

In England, the Treasury, the Cabinet Office's Strategy Unit (formerly the Performance and Innovation Unit), the Department for Education and Skills, the Department of Trade and Industry, and the Learning and Skills Council all have a major stake in this area, and the Department for Work and Pensions also has a toehold through its remit for Jobcentre Plus. Beneath them come the new Sector Skills Development Agency, the Regional Development Agencies, the local Learning and Skills Councils and local authorities. Largely hidden behind the scenes are a number of Task Forces charged with, for example, ensuring that programmes such as the Modern Apprenticeship and the New Deal meet their new targets. At local level, a host of organisations (colleges, private training providers, group training associations, trade unions, Connexions, Small Business Service, and so on) make up the rich tapestry designed to help, but more likely to confuse.

In order for all these organisations to make an impact on workplace learning, they need to be clear about how their particular responsibilities align with each other and the extent to which they conflict and/or overlap. Apart from the operational difficulties which can arise out of having too many organisations responsible for workplace learning, there is the important question of how we fight through this jungle in order to influence policy.

Locating expertise and sharing good practice

It is also very unclear as to where the real experts with regard to workplace learning might be found within this confusing landscape. The UK, unlike many other countries, has no dedicated research and development institute for workplace learning and vocational education. Research and development emerges from a fragmented community of academics working in a wide range of university departments (e.g. economics, social policy, education, labour market studies, work psychology, business and management), from the growing number of consultancy organisations who undertake work for government departments and related agencies, from organisations such as NIACE, the Learning and Skills Development Agency and the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development, and from large private and public sector organisations such as BT and the National Health Service. The work of these organisations needs to be brought together so that greater value can be gained and new ideas generated.

In terms of practitioners who might support organisations to become more expansive in their approach to workplace learning, it is also unclear as to where and who they are, or how they are being developed. The problem lies in the lack of a regulatory framework for workforce development. This would need to include such requirements as licences to practise, including one for training, for a much wider set of occupations. Organisations wishing to employ apprentices, for example, would have to show they had qualified trainers on-site and named workplace supervisors/mentors designated to support each apprentice.

Centres of Vocational Excellence

The newly emerging Centres of Vocational Excellence in further education colleges in England provide an important opportunity to build capacity and act as a locus for joined-up action on workforce development. This initiative was launched in July 2002, when 16 pathfinder centres specialising in a range of vocational fields (e.g. engineering, health and social care, construction) were announced. The Government's aim is to have established 400 Centres by 2006 and to have extended them beyond colleges to training centres in companies and other training providers. The Centres' objectives are: to develop and strengthen innovative approaches by colleges and providers to meeting the country's skills needs; to enhance the standing of Learning and Skills Council funded providers with employers; and to encourage collaboration and promote the concept of excellence in economically-relevant specialisms. The Centres are a very welcome attempt to raise the profile of vocational education and provide colleges with much-needed resources to strengthen and promote their specialist departments. They could, however, play a much bigger role in stimulating workplace learning.

The importance of the Centres to workplace learning lies in their potential to be the focal point of vocational expertise for an occupationally-specific community of practice which includes the college's own staff and learners, employers, staff in local higher education institutions, local and regional agencies with a workforce development brief, and community organisations. Rather than being limited to the role of provider, the Centres should be:

- engaged in research, developing new forms of teaching and learning appropriate to different workplace settings;
- working with employers to introduce high performance practices;
- hosting expert seminars;
- showcasing innovative ways to improve the acquisition and transfer of skills and knowledge;
- forming partnerships with relevant departments in their local universities.

In addition to the provider-focused strategic objectives set by government, the Centres should have a set of objectives related to the role they can play in organisational transformation.

SECTION FIVE

Recommendations for current and future policy

Introduction

Policymakers and a range of interested parties in the UK are currently wrestling with a range of ideas to promote and enhance workplace learning. This is a difficult arena for policy. Employers have to be convinced that investment in learning will help their organisations develop and succeed. Individuals may be in jobs which offer little in the way of progression and so want access to learning in order to escape their current employment situation. Society wants individuals to gain as many skills as possible so that they can respond to changing labour market conditions. Policymakers have to strike a balance between responding to employer need and circumstance, achieving a fair deal for individuals, and meeting their targets for the nation's economic and social health.

The new Skills Strategy White Paper indicates that the Government considers the best way to use public funds for adult learning is to increase the numbers of people gaining qualifications at level 2 and to solve the skills crisis in terms of literacy, language and numeracy (DfES, 2003). Too great an emphasis on qualifications, however, may mean that more creative and sustainable strategies for improving workplace learning will be lost. For example:

- There will be many people in work who do not hold a level 2 qualification but who have levels of experiential learning which would enable them to move straight to a higher level qualification.
- Qualifications are important for individuals who need them to change jobs or gain promotion but they do not, of themselves, transform workplaces.
- An emphasis on qualifications will not help or motivate providers of education and training to develop provision which is responsive to employers' needs.

Placing learning in context

Throughout this paper, we have stressed the need for workplace learning to be viewed as a process which cannot be separated from its organisational context and which, in turn, could help to transform organisational capability. For individuals in work, their opportunities to learn will be determined by the position of their organisation on the expansive–restrictive continuum. Individuals employed in organisations classified as

'restrictive' will need to seek ways to gain access to learning opportunities outside the workplace. But how might they do this? Currently, there are a number of organisations vying for their attention but it is not clear how the individuals and the organisations find each other.

For individuals outside paid employment, their only access to workplace learning opportunities is through involvement in the New Deal programme which finds them a work placement in the public, private or voluntary sector. Those placements, however, could be with organisations stretched from one end of the expansive–restrictive continuum to the other, though they are more likely to reside at the restrictive end with small employers whose circumstances make it less possible for them to provide expansive learning opportunities.

The country is awash with initiatives and agencies, primarily focused on hitting qualification-based targets. What is needed is a much harder-edged and brave policy framework focused on **learning**. Within such a framework, qualifications would play an important role, but they would not be the sole determinant of success.

In order to pursue more expansive approaches to workplace learning, the Government needs to apply greater restrictions: as we said earlier in the paper, being restrictive is not always a bad thing! The framework would be characterised by the following features:

1. It would establish greater coherence between the responsibilities of the various organisations currently charged with improving workplace learning.
2. It would make clearly visible which sections of the Government were taking responsibility for workplace learning and how these responsibilities 'joined up'.
3. It would restrict public funding for workplace learning (and in particular Modern Apprenticeship) to organisations that were prepared to show a commitment to moving towards becoming expansive learning environments.
4. It would place as much focus on adults (in and outside paid employment) as on young people.
5. It would regulate more sectors through licences to practise and make it a statutory requirement that such sectors employed trained trainers.
6. It would place at its core the need for a dedicated and highly trained cadre of professionals able to support organisations as they make the necessary cultural transformation to become expansive.
7. It would establish learning champions both within and outside the workplace (in the case of the latter, they would be placed in key community organisations).
8. It would provide incentives to organisations to increase training for managers to enable them to foster and maintain expansive learning environments.
9. It would make the public sector set the standard and reward exemplar private sector organisations.

10 It would reward further and higher education institutions which developed workable strategies for helping organisations make the transition to become expansive learning environments.

11 It would establish a single national agency dedicated to research and development in the field of workplace learning and vocational education and make this a focal point for the dissemination of ideas and good practice. This would be independent from the Government agencies which fund vocational education and training provision.

12 It would establish greater coherence between its policies on further and higher education, social inclusion, skills, and unemployment in order to show that workplace learning, workforce development and vocational education were important and relevant to all levels of society, not just to those classified as at or below level 2.

These recommendations would help government policy on workplace learning break free of its current restrictive straightjacket and snap the ties of voluntarism which have held back both people and our private and public sector organisations from reaching their full potential.

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Expanding LEARNING in the Workplace

Making more of individual and organisational potential

Lorna Unwin and Alison Fuller

Learning in the workplace can bring economic, social, and personal benefits. However, to build upon, improve and extend such learning places significant demands on everyone involved from individuals and employers to government and its agencies.

So how can learning be fostered, improved and increased in the workplace?

Drawing on illustrations from recent research, this policy discussion paper explores how access to and participation in learning in the workplace can be enhanced for all and how the workplace can play a key role in the nation's plans for greater learning participation.

The paper argues that an understanding of and support for teaching and learning has to lie at the heart of a new workforce development strategy. It explores the implications of an expansive approach to workplace learning and how to create the institutional capacity to support it. In conclusion the authors make a series of recommendations towards formulating a policy framework which will allow both employees and organisations to reach their full potential.

Lorna Unwin is Professor in Vocational Education and Alison Fuller Senior Research Fellow, at the Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester.

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